

EAST SIDE HIGHWAY
(Washington Highway 123)
Mount Rainier National Park
Between Ohanapecosh Entrance and Cayuse Pass
Longmire Vicinity
Pierce County
Washington

HAER No. WA-124

HAER
WASH
27-LONG-V
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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I. INTRODUCTION

Location: Between Ohanapecosh Entrance and Cayuse Pass
Mount Rainier National Park, Lewis and Pierce
counties, Washington.
Quads: Ohanapecosh Hot Springs, Wash.
Chinook Pass, Wash.
UTMs:
South End, 1 mi. S. of Ohanapecosh Ranger Station
10/608800/5174680
North End, Cayuse Pass 10/611350/5191225

Date of Construction: 1931-1940

Designer: Bureau of Public Roads

Owner: Mount Rainier National Park, National Park Service

Use: Park highway

Significance: Connecting with the Mather Memorial Parkway at Cayuse
Pass, the East Side Highway provides access to the
park from southeastern Washington state and serves as
an intra-state transportation artery.

Project Information: Documentation of the East Side Highway is part of the
Mount Rainier National Park Roads and Bridges
Recording Project, conducted in summer 1992 by
the Historic American Engineering Record.

Richard H. Quin, Historian, 1992

II. HISTORY

This is one in a series of reports prepared for the Mount Rainier National Park Roads and Bridges Recording Project. HAER No. WA-35, MOUNT RAINIER NATIONAL PARK ROADS AND BRIDGES, contains an overview history of the park roads.

East Side Highway

The East Side Highway (Washington Highway 123) provides vehicular access to the southeastern corner of Mount Rainier National Park and serves as a connecting link between Washington Highway 12 (White Pass Highway), Washington Highway 410 (Mather Memorial Parkway), and Washington Highway 706 (via the Nisqually Road and Stevens Canyon Highway). The road evinces the National Park Service's attention to landscape qualities through its use of rustic stone retaining walls, stone-faced bridges, sweeping curves, scenic vistas, and a tunnel with native stone portals. Designed not only as a park road but a state highway, the East Side Highway offers motorists a scenic drive through old-growth forest and the Ohanapecosh River valley.

The first consideration for a road through this area dates to 1907, when Major Hiram Chittenden of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposed an "around-the-mountain" road system for Mount Rainier National Park. The first segment of this ambitious planned system was the "Government Road," constructed between the Nisqually Entrance and Paradise Valley between 1904 and 1915. In the late 1920s, construction began on the West Side Road from near the Nisqually Entrance to the Carbon River country. This road, however, was never extended beyond the North Fork of the Puyallup River, because the National Park Service decided to preserve the most north and northwest areas of the park in a wilderness state with access limited to foot and pack trails. Today, the Carbon River and Mowich Lake areas in the northwest corner are reached by dead-end roads, but these form no part of a parkwide circuit road system.

The State of Washington constructed the "Naches Pass Highway" through the park's present northeast section between 1926 and 1931. Later renamed the "Mather Memorial Parkway" and designated as Washington Highway 410, this road enters the present park boundary near the Silver Springs area, heads generally south to Cayuse Pass, then swings east over Chinook Pass and on to Yakima. This road provided the first easy access to the park from eastern Washington. The White River Road to Yakima Park leaves this road 3 miles north of Cayuse Pass and provides access to a popular region of high mountain meadows and the Sunrise development.

A rough private road was constructed to the Ohanapecosh Hot Springs resort (no longer extant) in early 1924. The single-lane track, built by the developers of the thermal springs, was described as a "good road" in the 24 September issue of the Chehalis (Washington) *Bee Nugget*.¹ The new route was intended to connect at Lewis (now Packwood) Washington with a new highway being built by the state and the U.S. Forest Service. The new State Route 5, or "Cowlitz-Naches Road," would link with the Pacific Coast Highway south of Chehalis and then run east and northeast through Randle and Lewis. Much of this section was a reconstruction of existing roadway. It then would follow the Ohanapecosh River drainage north through Forest Service land to link with the Naches Pass Highway (at this point called the "McClellan Pass Highway") at Cayuse Pass. Although the Ohanapecosh springs lay a quarter mile outside the park, Mount Rainier Superintendent Owen A. Tomlinson complained that thousands of new visitors would be visiting a corner once seen only by a few hundred, and that the park had no facilities whatsoever for their accommodation.² The

state and Forest Service road was completed in rough form to the Clear Fork of the Cowlitz River, 5 miles northeast of Lewis, in July 1924.³

The state surveyed the 5 miles between Clear Fork and what was then the park boundary near Ohanapecosh late in 1925. That winter, work began on reconstructing and surfacing the state approach road as far as Lewis. The reconditioned road was built to an 18' wide standard and surfaced with crushed gravel as far as Lewis by 1927.⁴

The Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) began reconstruction of 6 miles of road across Forest Service land between Lewis and the Clear Fork of the Cowlitz River in 1928. The BPR, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was responsible for road-building projects in the national forests and in 1925 also assumed responsibility for major road projects in the national parks. The Bureau hoped to complete the project in time for the 1929 tourist season.⁵ The remaining section of road to Ohanapecosh Hot Springs remained a primitive track passable only in the summer.

In 1931, the park boundaries were expanded to include a large area along this road as far east as the Cascade crest, and also the Ohanapecosh area in the southeast. The "McClellan Pass Highway" was completed through the northeast section of the park the following year and was renamed the "Mather Memorial Highway." [For a complete report on this road, see HAER No. WA-35g.] The State of Washington and the National Park Service had by this point determined to extend the road from Ohanapecosh north to meet the new road at Cayuse Pass.

The Bureau of Public Roads established a survey camp in the southeast corner of the park and began running its location surveys in June 1931. The survey party, under the direction of BPR Senior Engineer Inspector Foreman E. D. Kinney, was to locate a line to meet with the new Naches Pass Highway somewhere in the vicinity of Tipsoo Lake or Cayuse Pass, and was to investigate several potential crossings of the Cowlitz Divide.⁶

Construction of the 13.8-mile new road (called the "East Side Highway" on construction documents but "East Side Road" in many Park Service records) was contracted by the State of Washington to several private firms under supervision of the Bureau of Public Roads. The Mount Rainier National Park Superintendent and staff of the National Park Service Landscape Engineering Division worked closely with the BPR to insure that the park landscape was protected and that scenic features would be properly showcased.

Bids for the clearing of the first 5.2 miles of road were opened at the Portland, Oregon office of the BPR on 10 November 1931. The Grays Harbor Construction Company submitted the astonishingly low bid of only \$9,850 for the project. This was far below the engineers' estimate of \$32,000, and fears were expressed that the contractor would work at a great loss, leading to delays, unsatisfactory work, and other difficulties. The bidder was invited to the office to discuss the work, but the company insisted it could do the work at the price submitted. Accordingly, the contract was issued.⁷

Construction began soon afterwards. As had been expected, progress proved very slow, and bad weather forced a shutdown of work on 19 January 1932 with little having been accomplished. The BPR District Engineer ordered the contractor to resume work in April, but soon reported that work was falling farther behind schedule, and, without a change of attitude on the part of the contractor, would be greatly delayed. Less than thirty men were at work where there should have been at least seventy-five. A subcontractor, on finding out there might be money problems, refused to do any further work. More delays

resulted when, on 27 May, the contractor was ordered to temporarily shut down operations on account of extreme fire hazard conditions then prevailing in the park. Despite the early delays, the company was able to make up much of the time and completed its grading work on 26 November.⁸

On 1 February 1932, a contract was let to Myers and Coulter of Seattle for the clearing, draining, grading and surfacing of 2.7 miles of road connecting the road with the state approach road. Myers and Coulter had just constructed the last link of the West Side Highway, and park and BPR officials were confident the firm could complete this work by the end of the 1932 construction season. By May, the firm had completed all clearing and burning work and was considerably ahead of schedule.⁹

A contract for clearing and grubbing the northern 4.57 mile section between Deer Creek and Cayuse Pass was not awarded in the initial round because the low bidders were known for trouble and delays on earlier projects. The project was rebid and the contract was awarded on 23 July 1932 to Milo Janovich.¹⁰

On 20 October 1932, bids for the grading of the Cayuse Pass-Deer Creek section were opened. The Southern California Construction Company was the low bidder and was recommended for the award. A day later, bids were opened for the grading of another 4.878 miles on the south section of the road was awarded to the Colonial Construction Company of Spokane, Washington. "Wild Bill" Estes erected a construction camp for the contractors at Ohanapecosh in November.¹¹

Camp N.P.6 of the Emergency Conservation Works (a division of the Civilian Conservation Corps public relief program) was established at Ohanapecosh Hot Springs in 1933. Workers from the camp were involved in highway maintenance and roadside cleanup along the East Side Highway over the next several years, although most of their work concerned trail maintenance and forestry work.¹²

Colonial Construction finished the clearing and grading of its section as far as Ohanapecosh Hot Springs in June 1933 and allowed visitors to begin travelling this far, although its operations above the springs were still incomplete. As part of its contract, the company was required to erect a temporary bridge at the crossing of Laughingwater Creek. The company assigned this work to a sub-contractor, James Parks. On 12 July, when the structure was nearly complete, it gave way, carrying Mr. Parks and several men down with it. Parks was mortally injured and died the following day in a Seattle hospital. The collapse of the bridge delayed the grading project nearly a month, as heavy equipment could not be transferred farther north. The final grading work was completed in the fall and the project was inspected by Superintendent Tomlinson on 10 October.¹³

On 29 November 1933, the contract for grading the section from Cougar Creek (now called Panther Creek) to a point 2.955 miles north was awarded to J. D. Harms, Inc., of Seattle. Harms began operations the following year and completed the contract in September 1935.¹⁴

Much of the newly-completed grading work on the section between the park boundary and Ohanapecosh Hot Springs was badly damaged by heavy rains in December 1933. The temporary span over Laughingwater Creek was washed away, forcing another delay at the crossing.¹⁵

Bids for clearing the final 3.24-mile section of the road in the Deer Creek area were opened by the BPR in September 1934 and Elich and Company were

recommended for the project on the 21st. This project would complete the clearing for the road. The company began its operations on 17 October.¹⁶

The 3 miles between Lewis and the Ohanapecosh Hot Springs area was now surfaced, providing a paved route into the southeast corner of the park. This work was completed in 1934, while work continued on the East Side Highway. The lower project, like those in the park, was supervised by the Bureau of Public Roads.¹⁷

The grading contract for the central 4.03-mile section, involving construction of a 507' tunnel, was awarded to Sam Orino of Bonneville, Oregon in 1936. Some of the funds for the road work were provided by the Public Works Administration and various Depression-era appropriations. Orino began work on this section on 4 June. The grading work was on fairly easy terrain, but Orino's equipment was old and broke down frequently. The park resident engineer reported that the resulting delays were "painful to watch." The pace of work picked up in mid-September and the tunnel face was reached. As part of this phase of the work, a temporary bridge was constructed over Deer Creek to allow equipment to pass over the grade.¹⁸

The Emergency Appropriation Act for fiscal year 1935 authorized an additional \$18,000 for clearing operations and \$240,000 for grading and tunneling work on the road. Another \$15,500 was appropriated for additional expenses for the Laughingwater Creek Bridge.¹⁹

The new East Side Highway involved the construction of four major structures. The permanent bridge across Laughingwater Creek [HAER No. WA-55] was built by the Portland, Oregon firm of Joplin and Eldon at a cost of roughly \$60,000. The structure is a three-span continuous concrete girder deck bridge resting on two concrete piers. At the time of its construction, the 8PR resident engineer reported that it was the longest continuous girder bridge yet attempted in the Pacific Northwest. It was completed on 19 October 1925 and accepted by the National Park Service eight days later.²⁰ (In 1992, it was scheduled for replacement.)

The 507' tunnel a mile northwest of Deer Creek was also constructed by the Sam Orino Company as part of the central segment contract. Orino's crew began work on the tunnel face in October 1936, but due to the collapse of a section near the north portal, the contract was not completed until December 1938. The Colonial Construction Company then lined the structure with steel and reinforced concrete, paved the roadway, and constructed the ashlar stone arch portals at each end. The structure was completed 15 October 1939 at a cost of \$288,596.²¹

The Deer Creek 8ridge [HAER No. WA-57], a reinforced concrete structure faced with dense gray conglomerate, was constructed in 1938-39 by Sam Orino under a separate contract. The characteristic "rustic style" structure was completed 17 August 1939 at a cost of \$69,614.11.²² Panther Creek was spanned by a rustic log stringer bridge which has since been replaced.

Following the clearing and grading work and the construction of the major road structures, another contract was let on 26 September 1936 to Sam Orino for the surfacing of 7.8 miles of the road extending north from the park boundary. The award was based on Orino's low bid of \$80,626.80. The 8PR specified a "Type 351" roadway with a minimum width of 24' and a surfaced width of 22'. The work also included slope stabilization, correction of drainage, and roadside cleanup of "bright" construction debris; logs covered with moss or lichens were to be left intact. George B. Forrest, Senior Engineering

Inspection Superintendent for the Bureau of Public Roads was resident engineer for the project.²³

This contract work began on 28 October at the upper end of the section; the higher elevation was chosen so that work could progress towards the lower end as winter weather set in. Work continued until 9 December when operations had to be shut down. Orino sublet the contract to Nyberg and Company in May 1937 and operations resumed. A crushing plant was installed, and fine grading got underway at the end of June. Actual surfacing began on 16 August, and the project was completed on 29 November.²⁴

On 24 November 1937, a contract for surfacing the upper section of the road was let to the Mirene Company on the basis of its low bid of \$113,423. The company began work in August 1938.²⁵

Work on the major structures was, as noted, completed in late 1939, but automobiles were not permitted on the road until the following summer. The 13.8-mile road was dedicated on 16 June 1940 at a ceremony held at the north portal of the tunnel. The dedication was sponsored by the Southwest Washington Good Roads Association. Mayor Harry P. Cain of Tacoma drove the first car through the tunnel. The total cost of construction of the new road was roughly \$1,500,000.²⁶ A total of 4,924 people traveled over the road on the first day.²⁷ The upper 6 miles of the road was surfaced in 1941 by the Mirene Company at a cost of \$144,873.07.²⁸

Like the Mather Memorial Parkway with which the new road connected, no entrance fees were initially collected from motorists. The road did provide access to the park, but also served an important function for intra-state travel. For instance, the distance between Chehalis and Yakima was cut from 202 miles to 174 miles by the new road link, and many businessmen and other point-to-point travelers made use of the route.²⁹ Nevertheless, the park administration agitated for a fee system.

As the park received only limited appropriations for road work during World War II and for a few years following, maintenance work had to be postponed. Park Superintendent John C. Preston reported the deterioration of the Panther Creek Bridge as early as 1947 and urged immediate repairs to the structure.³⁰

A survey crew from the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey painted benchmark witness markers on the road and on roadside rocks in 1946. As the white paint marks were very visible, Park Service Regional Director (and former Rainier Park Superintendent) O. A. Tomlinson wrote the USGS to ask why such a obtrusive marking system was used. The USGS replied that the marks were intended to be visible in aerial photographs; however, it accepted the Park Service's objection to such intrusions in the natural landscape, and that the practice would not be repeated. In the meantime, park crews had obliterated the marks.³¹

A ski area was developed on an experimental basis at Cayuse Pass in the late 1940s. As part of the development, a large parking area was constructed along the road for a distance of half a mile running south from Cayuse Pass, providing room for snow removal equipment and for cars to turn around.³² The ski area was soon abandoned, but the parking area remains.

Following the completion of the White Pass Highway between Packwood and Naches in 1951, the National Park Service the following summer began collecting \$1 entrance fees from motorists using the road. The justification was that the new highway now provided access between eastern and western Washington. An

entrance station was built at Ohanapecosh, where fees from both north and south-bound vehicles were obtained. The fee collection system was quickly criticized by motorists' groups. Judson C. Colburn, executive secretary-treasurer of the Washington State Resort Association, denounced the fees:

This puts our beautiful highway in the toll bridge category. It is like charging the people to look at our natural scenery. The association is not opposed to charging a fee for visits to Rainier National Park, but why charge people who are driving across one corner on a business or other through trip?³³

Another complaint was registered by Martin Kilian, the concessionaire at Ohanapecosh, that cars entering by way of Cayuse Pass could travel as far as Ohanapecosh and then turn around and exit without paying the fee.³⁴

In August 1954, Superintendent Preston P. Macy and members of his staff went to Olympia for a meeting with Governor Langlie and state highway officials concerning the state taking over maintenance of the East Side Highway. The park officials argued that, as the road largely served as a corridor between points rather than a park scenic road, the state should assume maintenance. Governor Langlie was, however, not sympathetic. The state agreed to assume winter maintenance in the Cayuse Pass area and on the Mather Memorial Highway section up from White River, releasing the Park Service crews for work on the Nisqually Road.³⁵

By order of Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay, the collection of entrance fees on the road was halted in 1955, as many motorists were using it for through-park travel. The park again asked the state to take over maintenance of the road, but was refused. The state reluctantly agreed to take over winter maintenance in the White River and Cayuse Pass areas on a reimbursable basis.³⁶ A fee booth was operated for a while at the entrance to the Ohanapecosh development, but was soon discontinued.

The Panther Creek Bridge was replaced in 1957. The contractors for the new bridge were J. E. Collins & Company and R. C. James and Son, both of Bellevue, Washington. The work was started on 30 April 1957 and completed on 25 September. The steel-reinforced concrete deck bridge was built at a cost of \$95,535.48.³⁷

The East Side Highway was resurfaced with a 3" x 22' asphalt mat in 1958 as part of the National Park Service's ten-year "Mission 66" program. The \$444,759.06 contract was awarded on 11 June to the Pieler Construction Company of Port Angeles, Washington. The contract also included construction of campground roads at Ohanapecosh and a parking area on the Stevens Canyon Road at the Box Canyon picnic area. The work was completed on 6 October at a cost of \$456,925.64.³⁸

Following the paving work, the State of Washington took over regular maintenance of the East Side Highway under a special-use permit issued 21 January 1959. The road was officially redesignated as "Washington Highway 123" on 1 January 1968.³⁹

An entrance arch similar to that at the Nisqually Entrance was constructed over the road $\frac{1}{2}$ -mile south of Ohanapecosh in 1976.⁴⁰ This was the third such entrance structure built in the park; another was located at the northeast entrance on the Mather Memorial Parkway just south of Silver Springs.

The National Park Service and the Washington State Department of Transportation signed a cooperative agreement relating to the maintenance of all state and federal roads inside all national parks in Washington state. Under the terms of the agreement, the National Park Service is charged with all maintenance and improvement work for State Highway 123 inside the Mount Rainier National Park boundaries.⁴¹

III. ENDNOTES

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4. Idem, Superintendent's Monthly Report, December 1925; Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1926. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1924-1927 file.
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20. W. D. Simpson, Assistant Highway Bridge Engineer, Bureau of Public Roads, "Final Construction Report (1935) on Laughing Water Creek Bridge, East Side Highway, Mt. Rainier National Park Project NR-5-A, Mt. Rainier National Park, Lewis County, State of Washington," 1935, pp. 1-5, *passim*. Federal Highway Administration files, transferred 1992 to Mount Rainier National Park Archives.
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24. Forrest, 3-4; Tomlinson, Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1937, 5. MORA Archives, Box H2615, Superintendents' Monthly Reports 1936-1939 file.
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37. Earl B. Wilson, Park Engineer, Mount Rainier National Park, "Completion Report of Construction Project, Panther Creek Bridge," 30 April 1959. MORA Archives, Roads and Trails Box 1.
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40. Daniel J. Tobin, Jr., Superintendent, Mount Rainier National Park, Superintendent's Annual Report, 1976, 13. MORA Archives, Box H2621, Superintendents' Annual Reports 1972-1983 file.
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